

University of Groningen

Failure and understanding-with in entrepreneurial journalism

Brouwers, Amanda Danielle

Published in:
Journal of Media Business Studies

DOI:
[10.1080/16522354.2018.1445161](https://doi.org/10.1080/16522354.2018.1445161)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Brouwers, A. D. (2017). Failure and understanding-with in entrepreneurial journalism. *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 14(3), 217-233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16522354.2018.1445161>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.



Failure and *understanding-with* in entrepreneurial journalism

Amanda Daniëlle Brouwers

To cite this article: Amanda Daniëlle Brouwers (2017) Failure and *understanding-with* in entrepreneurial journalism, Journal of Media Business Studies, 14:3, 217-233, DOI: [10.1080/16522354.2018.1445161](https://doi.org/10.1080/16522354.2018.1445161)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16522354.2018.1445161>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 02 Apr 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 819



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Failure and *understanding-with* in entrepreneurial journalism

Amanda Daniëlle Brouwers

Department of Media Studies and Journalism, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article develops an understanding of failure in entrepreneurial journalism which academics may use to investigate how failure functions in everyday practices. Analysis of auto-ethnographic data concerning a journalistic start-up shows that feelings of failure function as evaluation tools for activities, and possibly serve as references evaluating future activities. This makes failure an important guiding concept for practices, requiring a proper understanding. This article unpacks failure through the lens of a journalistic start-up examined by means of (auto-)ethnographic data from its founders. It concludes that, rather than understanding failure as a cohesive concept with one function, we may better understand it as (1) a term with fluid meanings, (2) consisting of a plurality of experiences, and (3) constructed in *becoming-with* (Haraway, 2016) others.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 July 2017

Accepted 11 January 2018

KEYWORDS

Entrepreneurial journalism;
auto-ethnography;
co-construction; tacit
knowledge; failure

Introduction

In November 2016, I presented my journalistic start-up to the public for the first time. In a public feedback session, my five co-founders and I introduced PodGront, a production house for podcasts in the city of Groningen, the Netherlands. PodGront's goals are to (1) find a sustainable business model for podcasting, and (2) explore alternative ways in which audio can be used for journalistic, social, and artistic storytelling. Although it is not solely a journalistic venture, part of PodGront's activities can be described as entrepreneurial journalism. Those would be the activities in which it tries to create a financially sustainable model to support journalistic storytelling. This latter point is important, since PodGront is no regular start-up: it was founded as part of an auto-ethnography aimed at investigating entrepreneurial journalism, which in turn is part of the bigger research project "Entrepreneurship at work" (Witschge, 2015).

The objective of the auto-ethnography within this project is to provide and reflect upon detailed observations of practices of entrepreneurial journalism. Ever since I started my PhD and subsequently my entrepreneurial activities, I have constantly reflected on my sayings, doings, materialities (Ahva, 2017), and emotions through daily audio-logs.¹ My overall PhD takes a bottom-up, practice theory approach

CONTACT Amanda Daniëlle Brouwers  a.d.brouwers@rug.nl  Department of Media Studies and Journalism, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

(Ahva, 2017; Schatzki, 2001), which is to say it does not define entrepreneurial journalism beforehand. As research (Vos & Singer, 2016) shows, the term of entrepreneurial journalism is considered to be “vague” and practitioners use this ambiguity to their advantage. Rather than defining and thereby narrowing down practices of entrepreneurial journalism, my project taps into how the auto-ethnographer makes use of this ambiguous definition.

This standpoint towards the definition of entrepreneurial journalism is characteristic for the entire study, which does not concern itself with definitions and normative theory-building, but focuses on how entrepreneurial journalism is a process of *becoming-with* (Haraway, 2016) on the level of everyday practices. *Becoming-with* here refers to the idea that “nothing makes itself” (Haraway, 2016, p. 158), but is always in connection with other actors, actants, pasts, and/or futures. One objective of my study is to tease out how discourse, activities, materialities, and different sorts of affect are constructing practices of entrepreneurial journalism together, trying to create an understanding of *how* practices work, rather than *what* they are. This also applies to the concept of failure. Approximately one year into my PhD, I noticed many of my daily reflections were described in terms of failure or success. Furthermore, feelings of failure seemed to function as evaluation tools for activities, and possibly serve as references to evaluate future activities (in the manner imaginary interlocutors, or imaginary audiences, did in the study of De Sola Pool & Shulman, 1959²), making failure an important guiding concept. Following up on this, I attempted to understand and conceptualise failure and its function(s) by making use of previous literature on the topic. However, much prior research describes failure as having one definition and one function: as either a learning tool (Briggs, 2012) or something to be avoided (Van de Walle, 2016). This did not match my own experiences of failure, which would change meanings and functions from moment to moment, change from logical to illogical per instance or even in the same instance, and mismatch affect and function (causing negative affect when the function was positive, or vice versa). Finding one conceptualisation to explain my experiences of failure then, seemed to fall short of lived experiences. My question became how to properly understand and conceptualise failure in a way that stays loyal to lived experiences of failure, which in turn gives us valuable insights into how failure works on the level of everyday practices.

This article develops an understanding of failure in entrepreneurial journalism which we can use to investigate *how* failure functions in everyday practices. To assess how failure may be understood, the remainder of the article unpacks failure in the context of my journalistic start-up through an examination of (auto-) ethnographic data from its founders. It focuses primarily on experiences of failure – therefore you will find no definitive conceptualisation or definition in this article – but it does not exclude that the theoretical concept of failure (in a variety of fields) might partially construct that experience. I commence by assessing how we may understand failure if we try to do this *through* literature, showing how these conceptualisations mismatched with my experiences of failure. What follows is a section which shows how understanding failure *with* literature, discourses, activities, and materialities is more beneficial if we try to investigate how failure works

in everyday practices. The driving argument in both sections is that we require a focus on embodied, tacit knowing to achieve an *understanding-with*. The latter section will also elaborate a bit more on the methodology underlining this project. I conclude by arguing that rather than understanding failure as a cohesive concept with a clear function, we may better understand it as (1) a term with fluid meanings, (2) consisting of a plurality of experiences, and (3) constructed in the (realised or imagined) *becoming-with* of actors and actants.

Understanding failure through literature

In this section, I aim to understand failure through previous conceptualisations of the concept, as described in the literature from both journalism and entrepreneurship studies. This allows us to assess why these previous conceptualisations (alone) mismatched with my experiences of failure. Besides this understanding, a first glance at the literature on failure provides us with two other insights, which I will elaborate in the coming paragraphs: (1) combining conceptualisations of failure from entrepreneurship and journalism into entrepreneurial journalism may become problematic if we adhere to previous conceptualisations alone, and (2) failure as a concept has been blackboxed (Latour, 1999).

Both in entrepreneurship and journalism studies, there is a theoretical place for the concept of failure, although the perception of the concept is quite different. Whereas entrepreneurship studies describe failure as a tool for learning which eventually leads to innovation (Briggs, 2012; Ries, 2011; Shepherd, Williams, Wolfe, & Patzelt, 2016), in journalism studies failure is treated more negative, as something to be avoided (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). This could be because journalism is sometimes conceptualised as providing a public service (Galperin, 2017). Literature concerning failure of services provided for the public describes the failure of delivering a service falling short of established norms as something that happens from time to time, but should ideally be avoided (Van de Walle, 2016). When entrepreneurship and journalism are then combined into entrepreneurial journalism, how would failure be conceptualised? As a learning tool? As something to be avoided? Choosing one specific conceptualisation may become problematic: for example, what happens to journalism as a field providing a public service when failure is allowed? Or, can journalists still innovate if failure is to be avoided?

What stands out here is that failure seems to have one proper, perhaps even normative conceptualisation in both entrepreneurship or journalism. Setting aside the question of how entrepreneurial or journalistic failure is defined, we can observe that it seems to have a distinct function in both fields: to learn from or to feel bad about (in order to avoid it in the future). There are few questions raised about *how* failure actually works as a learning tool or as a concept to be avoided. Those answers seem to be implied: you learn from failure when you experience failure and avoid doing the same thing in the future. However, is this really true? As there has been little research focussing on lived experiences of failure (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017), it remains unknown whether the conceptualisations above resonate with

everyday practices. I will problematise these conceptualisations with the discussion of an empirical example later.

In March 2017, PodGront organised a podcasting event together with another organisation. Only a handful of people showed up to the event, an aspect which caused a feeling of failure (embarrassment) running through my body. Other aspects of the event actually turned out the way we wanted them, and caused a mild feeling of excitement, of success, but the overall feeling was one of failure, primarily because of the low audience numbers. Did we learn from this and change the event? Or, did we avoid to do this in the future? Not quite. We repeated the event in October 2017, almost entirely in the same format and fashion. Although the event took place in a different venue, a different city, and had a different theme, the strategies we used to attract audiences remained almost the same. Failure seemed to have had only a minor learning function and while it had caused a threshold to do the same event again (a feeling of reluctance), I did not avoid doing the event. The second event was slightly more successful than the first, even though we did not change much – but it was unfortunately still not successful enough to repeat it again. The feeling of failure prevailed. The second time around then, failure did not function as a learning tool, but did cause avoidance. We have not made plans to organise a similar event again.

In contrast, in September 2017, PodGront participated with one specific podcast in a live podcasting event. We would record the podcast as we did at home, only this time the host would have a live audience to talk to as well. The format as such did not work: the host got very nervous being in front of a live audience, lost track of her story, and did not deliver all the information she wished to tell in front of this podcast-loving audience. The audience was not enjoying itself either – people were bored and checking their phones. The host and I left the event with a feeling of discomfort and embarrassment, both unsatisfied with the result. We repeated the live recording in November 2017, but we changed the entire format – instead of the host hosting, I interviewed the host to make sure we were on track, so that she could focus on telling her story. Furthermore, we had decided to do this event, only because it was for an audience which was interested in the topic of the podcast: historic cooking. This time, the host enjoyed talking to people who were clearly interested in her story and a lot of the recording time was used talking to people and answering questions from the audience (during the podcast and afterwards). In this example, we used the experience of failure to drastically change the format, and created a relaxed atmosphere that allowed the host to enjoy telling her story. In short: these were similar activities (live events), similar failures (lack of audiences or lack of interest of audiences), but failure had little effect in the former example, and caused avoidance in the long run; whereas, it clearly functioned as a learning tool in the latter. This all happened within the same company. If we wanted to understand failure in both these examples, we could not rely on theoretical conceptualisations that allow for only one function attributed to failure per field. They would not sufficiently capture the complexities of failure in our everyday experiences.

Failure's meaning and function seems to be so taken for granted that we do not question how it functions and sometimes do not even know how to recognise it in practice (as we will see further along in this article). I would thus argue that the concept of failure has been blackboxed, as we have neglected to unpack its internal complexities (Latour, 1999, p. 304). How failure is blackboxed is exemplified by a meeting I had with practitioners who describe themselves as journalists or entrepreneurial journalists. After a presentation about my investigation of failure, one entrepreneurial journalist commented: "I find experiencing failure normal. (...) I have things from ten years ago that still bum me out. But I can think about it or I can move on. It's just life." As if there was nothing more to investigate. This then, is exactly how a concept gets blackboxed in practice, by describing something that is "just the way it is" without questioning it or going into specifics. In the academic literature, the same happens when we discuss failure in a normative manner: when we already know whether failure should be avoided or not and in which way failure would preferably be used (Briggs, 2012; Ries, 2011; Van de Walle, 2016).

How then, can we surpass the "one-function-fits-all" theoretical conceptualisations described above and remove the box that has prevented an understanding of the internal complexities of failure? By focussing on the practices of *understanding-with* – derived of the concept of *becoming-with* (Haraway, 2016) mentioned earlier and further explained in the following section. Focusing on understanding-with literature and practices, I create an applied, embodied understanding informed by tacit knowing, wherein the latter may include all sorts of previous and future knowledge. This type of understanding allows us to investigate *how* failure functions on the level of everyday practices, and bridges the gap between theoretical and empirical knowledge and knowing.

Understanding-with literature, practices, and tacit knowing

A large part of academic studies focuses on theoretical knowledge, which is the understanding of conceptual frameworks and large bodies of knowledge (Hirschheim & Klein, 2003). This often results in top-down, normative theory building: failure *should* be a learning tool or failure *should* be avoided. Another form of knowledge which is often used is called empirical knowledge, knowledge which depends on experience – gained through the senses or through introspection – for justification (Audi, 2015). This is a very concrete form of knowledge, constructed bottom-up through e.g. observations or experiments, focussing on what actors are doing, saying, thinking, and feeling. This more closely resembles what happens on the level of practices and experiences, so it is more likely to resonate with practitioners (not only academics). Empirical knowledge may construct theoretical knowledge, and vice versa theoretical knowledge sometimes serves as a structuring tool for empirical knowledge. However, less attention is given to how the two are *linked* and how they work *with* each other. By choosing either form of knowledge as a starting point, we end up in the dilemma Bruno Latour (2005) describes in *Reassembling the social*: we can not only look at local interactions, but neither can we study a floating framework above our heads. Both approaches seem

to simplistic. So then, what should we do? I argue that we can use the concept of *tacit knowing* to bridge the separation between theoretical knowledge and empirical knowledge, which will then lead us to the applied, embodied³ *understanding-with* that helps with the unpacking of failure.

Tacit knowledge or tacit knowing is rooted in – but not solely based on – lived experiences (Hirschheim & Klein, 2003). Hirschheim and Klein (2003) describe it as applicative knowledge, which is often referred to as “experience”, “common sense”, or “wisdom”, closely connected to personal emotions and interests. It is the sort of knowledge that is situated (Harway, 1988), valid only in very specific situations. Because it is very much a form of embodied knowledge, it is sometimes difficult to communicate to others. Michael Polanyi (1966) gives a textbook example of this point in his book *The Tacit Dimension*. Here, he describes experiments in which respondents were presented with a list of words they had to read out loud, one at a time, and would get an (I can only assume mild) electric shock when certain words would appear. All respondents learned to avoid to utter the words that caused the shock, but – and here is the interesting part – they could not articulate which words they were. In Polanyi’s words: they responded to the appearance, but the particulars remained tacit. We can compare this to my description of failure in the introduction: as evaluation tool for activities. What I respond to is the affect that is, or is caused by, failure – only upon reflection I can come to the conclusion that I am probably assessing how my audience would respond (here audiences function as the imaginary interlocutors mentioned before; De Sola Pool & Shulman, 1959) and my body generates the affect that would go together with their reaction. Those are particulars, which without reflection remain tacit.

Tacit knowing is thus concerned with both the appearance (e.g. the bodily experience of failure, the affect) that an actor acts upon and the particulars, the internal complexities, that construct the appearances. Whereas empirical knowledge would focus only on appearance, and theoretical knowledge would claim to explain the particulars behind empirical knowledge, tacit knowing focuses on how the two work together and subsequently creates an understand of *how* something functions. It also allows for the particulars to be in constant motion: so there is not a set system from which an appearance is guided, but particulars which are influenced by new data. Furthermore, it opens up our concepts to a process of understanding-with, a term which is inspired by Donna Haraway’s “*becoming-with*” (2016). Its basis is that nothing is constructed in isolation. Thus, we are never becoming, or understanding, in isolation, but always becoming- or understanding-*with*. The appearance of failure that is acted upon is guided by particulars that may include empirical and theoretical knowledge, consisting of both earlier experiences of failure and discourses on the normative, theoretical function. Influences do not limit themselves to one particular kind of data, one particular actor or actant (Latour, 2005).

The method I use to tease out tacit knowledge is auto-ethnography (briefly mentioned earlier). This is a method which allows for the measurement of the researcher’s embodied experiences (appearance), and is furthermore focused on eliciting introspection and self-reflection (Ellis, 2004), allowing the researcher to

tease out particulars that guide experiences. Reflection is the most important tool of the method (Ellis, 2004). Auto-ethnography is not undebated: results/knowledges are situated and do not apply to a large group (thus failing the traditional test of generalisability and external validity), and there is a fair risk of bias in research when object and subject are merged. However, it is precisely the bias that we are questioning and that becomes our object of research (“why do I have certain biases, why do I regard them as normal”) – thus we should access them somehow, and we do this by merging object and subject. Influences are recorded, instead of avoided. I focus on how subject and object work together, not artificially isolating them, but teasing out how they are *becoming-with* (see above). For instance, some literature on failure was read after experiencing failure, and some before – I have attempted to keep track of these chronologies, so I could tease out which piece of the literature might have influenced my experiences. It is more interesting to me *whether and how* literature influences, than to try and create a “pure” experience without bias. The specifics are becoming important, and so situated knowledge becomes important. It matters in what exact situation, in what combination *I am becoming-with*. Moreover, because the specifics become important, generalisability becomes less important. In fact, external validity in auto-ethnography is described vastly different than in other social sciences: research does not have to account for all it describes, but rather it has to resonate with its readers (Ellis, 1999). If they perceive it as believable, it is valid in the auto-ethnographic sense (Ellis, 1999). In this form of validity, it does not matter whether a story *speaks* for a large group, but whether a large group can take something away from the story regardless of whether they share the same experience or not. Insights about particulars that will show *how* they work in entrepreneurial journalism and invite readers to test their own reflections are more valuable in auto-ethnography than a conceptualisation that explains all practices of entrepreneurial journalism. Thus, external validity in auto-ethnography tests value, not like-mindedness.

How then, would an *understanding-with* of failure in entrepreneurial journalism look like? In what is left of this section, I present how theoretical knowledge, empirical knowledge, and reflections intertwined contribute to my understandings of failure in entrepreneurial journalism – concluding with my insights on how the construction of tacit knowing on failure can be understood in these instances (and hence can become a focus of research). Because I wanted to parallel how I experience my own understanding of failure. This understanding is messy, with some knowledge gained at exactly the same time, some knowing eliciting other knowing through association, in relation to other literature or practices, in relation to other literature or practices – instead of one argument neatly lined up after the other. Therefore, I present this to you in two columns *next* to each other, instead of arguing in a neat chronological order, so you can experience the messiness of *understanding-with*.

What can we say about this interplay of theoretical knowledge, empirical knowledge, and self-reflection if we do not focus on the knowledge itself, but focus on how the construction of knowing is situated? Two important insights should be mentioned here:



Theoretical Knowledge	Embodied Experience (Empirical Knowledge + Self-reflections)
<p>Failure is rarely the focus of studies on entrepreneurship (Shepherd et al., 2016). Nonetheless, it is often characterised by academics and practitioners as an important concept (Briggs, 2012; Ries, 2011; Shepherd et al., 2016). It is deeply intertwined with experimentation (Briggs, 2012) and the eventual innovation that may upset an existing equilibrium (Schumpeter, 1934), resulting in development and added value. In the entrepreneurial Silicon Valley, failure is considered a normal phase of one's career (Briggs, 2012). Considered with regard to entrepreneurship, failure can mean the bankruptcy of a business, a start-up or project that stops existing. However, we may also see failure in broader terms, as is done in the arts. Failure then, means the gap between intention and realisation (Le Feuvre, 2010), and can be present in everyday experiences of entrepreneurship.</p>	
<p>Literature largely ignores the impact of failure on the individual entrepreneur, with Shepherd et al. (2016) as an exception. The authors found that failure "thwarts individuals' needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy" (p. 27).</p>	<p>I am sitting at the desk placed next to our festival event. There are literally seven people listening to our podcast in the room next to me, or walking through the city with our podcast-walk. Two of them are my parents. Only one of them was not invited by us. We never expected much of an audience – but we expected more than this. I had prepared myself for failure in terms of content, felt relieved and happy⁴ that failing this way could help me improve, but had feared³ failure in terms of audience numbers. We wanted to test the podcast, but could not possibly learn from so little input. I am dreading the harsh words of one of my partners, and the disappointment of the others. I do not want to talk to them. I just want to walk away. I remember the time when I wanted to flush myself down the toilet, only to pop up at the other side of the world. I want to fail without anybody seeing.</p>
<p>Failure affects an individual's well-being. Negative emotions are said to block learning, though the authors show that accepting them may also be productive (Shepherd et al. (2016)). The entrepreneur may take responsibility right away, and start learning, instead of first protecting one's self-esteem.</p>	<p>We discuss where things went wrong afterwards, which makes me question my promotional skills. Furthermore, every negative word from my partners makes me feel they are getting closer to giving up on this project, and that we are not really a team. I feel alone. This is similar to how I felt when my earlier proposal was rejected by the rest of my co-founders.</p>
<p>"Embarrassment is a natural response to failure (...)" (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 17).</p>	<p>So far, only 18 people listened to our new podcast. Only six or eight people listened all the way through. I knew it was too long. I claimed I wanted to test that, so in theory, I should not be disappointed now. However, I cannot seem to help feeling embarrassed. I will bounce back in a few days, when I had time to process this disappointment.</p>
<p>Surprisingly, Shepherd et al. (2016) show that individuals seek to be seen as authentic more than they want to be seen as positive by others (p. 218).</p>	<p>(Continued)</p>

(Continued).

Theoretical Knowledge

Although Shepherd et al. (2016) state that developing self-compassion may help broaden attention and undo negative emotions by generating positive ones instead, they also point towards how others see a business or project that has failed. In their words, "(...) more often than not, failed entrepreneurs face considerable stigmatization from various others." (p. 194) This may be summed up by the word "stigma". The level of stigma differs across regions (Shepherd et al. (2016)), just as what is considered a failure depends on time and place (Le Feuvre, 2010). In a way, this brings us back to the gap between intention and realisation. Intention is closely aligned with expectation, and currently the expectation is that entrepreneurs will be successful in running and growing their business (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 196).

One of my direct partners states that he does not see failure as something negative, but as something to learn from. However, every time I show him some work, I am dreading to hear his negative comments. I sink into negative emotions afterwards – is that what I am afraid of? He has had such high expectations of me since the beginning. I am afraid of letting him down. I am afraid of him seeing me as an idiot through failure, as in the Idiotcy Assumption described by Catherine Schulz (2010) (if someone has the same facts as yourself, but fails, (s) he must not have the brains to comprehend the issue). Nobody told me that they think I am an idiot, but any mention of failure in my work makes me fear they view me this way.

He has had such high expectations of me since the beginning. I am afraid of letting him down.

Tacit knowledge about failure, journalism, and entrepreneurship influences everyday practices and discourses.

"Failure is in the eye of the beholder". (Van de Walle, 2016)

The stigma of others seems to be a stigma I construct by myself – I fear failure. I am one of millions programmed at an early stage to think failure is bad (Edmondson, 2011). I thrive on hearing someone say: "Well done". My body reacts to critiques or compliments by feeling energetic and light, or by feeling heavy. If I am honest: I base success or failure on the opinion of others. The interaction with others is therefore scary and what keeps my passion going at the same time. It opens your work up to failure and success, especially in journalism, which adheres to different norms and is not easily measured in numbers or euros.

Failure is rarely a focus of, and hardly ever mentioned in, journalism studies. Existing research has (indirectly) engaged with failure by looking at (1) the quality of journalistic texts or (2) the failure of business models. (3) Research attempting to understand failure through the lived experience of journalist is relatively rare (Wahl-Jørgensen, 2017). Furthermore, some texts address the success or failure journalistic system as a whole, assessing whether it falls short of set norms and values (Bennett et al., 2007) – reinforcing those same norms and values in the process (usually examining one case study). The focus on normative criteria for the quality of journalistic texts and the journalistic system parallels with the conceptualisation of journalism as providing a public service (Coleman, 2014; Benson, 2017; Galper, 2017), which in turn impacts how failure is conceptualised. For conceptualisations of failure in public services differ from conceptualisations of failure in private services. Failure in organisations deliver services against established norms from time to time (Van de Walle, 2016), but this should be avoided and also does not have a function. It may lead to changes in the organisation of the service, but almost never to changes in the idea of the service itself. When these ideas do change, it is presumably because they can vary in different political environments (Van de Walle, 2016).

*Embodied Experience
(Empirical Knowledge + Self-reflections)*

(Continued)

(Continued).	
<i>Theoretical Knowledge</i>	<div><div><i>Embodied Experience</i> <i>(Empirical Knowledge + Self-reflections)</i></div><p>As a part of a local radio show, I once organised a live event. The whole team was unsure whether we had enough time and people to pull it off. Those doubts were not unreasonable: about 1 h or less before we would start there was still a gap at the beginning of our show, and none of the necessary editorial sheets were printed. I was trying to do the latter, but the printer broke down every few minutes, making the job frustrating and extremely time-consuming. Then one of our editors came to me, announcing the two people he would ask for an interview said "yes", and the gap was filled. Relieved, I quickly typed a sheet for our host... – ... only to find out at the beginning of the interview that I typed down the wrong names. I felt ashamed, but had to go on with the show, so eventually I forgot. One of the guests however, came back to our table to tell us how unprofessional that was. I was extremely embarrassed and let somebody else handle the conversation, scared of being judged. For the first time I thought: I really wish I could go into the bathroom and flush myself down the toilet. I tried to figure out whether I or the editor had been wrong.</p></div>
	"Embarrassment is a natural response to failure (...)" (Le Feuvre, 2010, p. 17).

- (1) The appearance of failure is not lived as one distinctive moment, but as a plurality of experiences. I have not observed one explicit instance in which my whole start-up or even one product failed. Instead, there were many moments when realisation was not parallel to intention and I experienced a feeling of embarrassment – the seemingly typical emotional reaction to failure. This was not limited to one sort of failure either: upon reflection, failure to adhere to journalistic norms, failure to attract audiences (in real-life and online), and failure to live up to a certain identity could all be observed – but they all appeared the same to me, as a feeling of embarrassment. To isolate one specific sort of failure to discuss (e.g. business model or to adhere to journalistic norms) and to describe that as a singular moment (e.g. the moment a company files for bankruptcy) seems to insufficiently capture how failure is lived in everyday activities. Rather, it is lived as numerous fleeting moments in which the appearance of failure manifests itself as a feeling.
- (2) The meaning and function of failure is constructed in relation with/to other actors, possibly changing the particulars that influence the appearance of failure. From the first moment when I worried about the reactions from my co-founders, to the last moment when another actor (an interviewee in this case) complained about my mistake, each moment of failure was constructed either in explicit or imagined interactions carried out with other actors. Or, in other words, they were constructed either with discourse or activities with other actors, or with audiences or partners serving as imaginary interlocutors (De Sola Pool & Shulman, 1959), where the latter implies an assumed shared knowledge which I can utilise. This emphasises the *becoming-with* mentioned earlier in this section; and places a specific emphasis on the entrepreneurial journalist *becoming-with* business partners and the entrepreneurial journalist *becoming-with* audiences. For our understanding, it means that we cannot analyse how failure functions by looking only at the entrepreneurial journalist, but we also have to look (among other things) at explicit or imagined connections with their partners and audiences.

Besides these insights, one can already see that the understandings presented in the experiences above are an interplay of different sorts of knowledge: sometimes my experience is clearly guided by what I read in the academic literature, other times my empirical data confirm research, whereas coming back to a theoretical or empirical piece of data sometimes changes an experience. One can see a glimpse of how failure is functioning in the everyday practices of PodGront. Unfortunately, this article is not the place to completely unravel how failure functions in connection to these practices – rather, I wish to continue with further developing the understandings of failure, so I can properly tease out its workings in my future research endeavours.

Understanding-with others

PodGront was never an individual project. It was first initiated by me and five co-founders, and it is currently ran by me and one partner (and a lot of podcast producers

or podcast producers to be, not to forget the people who are not officially involved in PodGront, but who contribute to the overall product anyhow). As there is such a great emphasis on *becoming-with*, it is unavoidable that when I investigate failure, the reflexivity, activities, and materialities (Avha, 2017) of my co-founders and partner will also come to play a big role in data and analysis. How should I understand their experiences of failure? Is the understanding of failure above, as a plurality of experiences and as constructed through *becoming-with*, my unique understanding of failure, or do others in a similar situation experience failure in a similar way, and can we talk about shared experiences of failure? In other words, do I need to construct a different understanding of failure when I want to include the experiences of failure by somebody other than me (but in a similar situation) – or does the above understanding have shared components with others in similar situations?

To assess whether there is a shared understanding of failure, me and my co-founders turned to a creative exercise, similar to the Co-Construction Stories method used in creative design industries (Özçelik-Buskermolen & Terken, 2016): together we created two stories, two moments. One was a story of journalistic failure and another one of entrepreneurial failure. The aim of this co-construction is to tease out shared components of the experiences. The specific method helps my co-founders reflect on the concept of failure and helps them envision what understanding of failure would resonate with them or not. The original method is designed to both elicit “real-life” stories and “implicit” future stories – both sensitisation and envisioning (Özçelik-Buskermolen & Terken, 2016). In our case, it elicits further reflections on the implicit understandings of failure. One other note before we continue to our co-constructions: the above-mentioned partner was not involved with PodGront at the time of data collection, so his contribution will be excluded from this article.

The method started with an individual assignment, followed by further reflection together with me, and ended with evaluating the co-constructed story. The individual assignment my co-founders received looked like this:

Below you'll find 2 assignments and 5 questions. Please fill them out for me and reflect on all your answers (an example of a question you could use for reflection is: why do I think along these lines/why do I feel this way/which other people or concepts play a role in how I think about this?). It's up to you to find a focus for your reflection, but please be reminded I'm not only looking for “cognitive” information. Please also describe your feelings and smaller activities that may seem less important at first sight. You may write the reflection, but you may also record it. There's no word or time-limit. The assignments and questions are:

- (1) *Describe a moment in which you failed as a journalist (if you've experienced this at all). If there are multiple experiences, please name multiple experiences, but pick one for a more extended description and reflection.*
- (2) *Describe a moment in which you failed as an entrepreneur with PodGront (if you've experienced this at all). If there are multiple experiences, please name multiple experiences, but pick one for a more extended description and reflection.*
- (3) *Why did you choose these experiences to describe to me?*
- (4) *What kind of effect did these experiences have on you? Think about how they made you feel, but also what activities they may have triggered.*
- (5) *What place does failure have in journalism according to you, if it has a place at all?*

- (6) *What place does failure have in entrepreneurship according to you, if it has a place at all?*
- (7) *How do your answers to questions 5 and 6 match your experiences described with assignments 1 and 2?*

After I received the answers to these questions, I called each co-founder to continue the reflection in an informal manner (comparable to an informal interview done within an ethnography). This gave me a chance to probe a little deeper into their understanding of failure. Through analysing the results for re-occurring elements (Özçelik-Buskermolen & Terken, 2016) and combining these into one story, I then constructed shared experiences of journalistic and entrepreneurial failure. In a sense, these experiences are not “real”, since they did not happen as you read them now. However, they are based on authentic experiences and empirical data. They are many experiences, merged into one. How experiences of failure are represented in these stories resonates with me and all of my five co-founders – therefore, I used these stories to tease out shared components of our understanding of failure in journalism and entrepreneurship. This was not done through formal coding, but through further reflections by the researcher – as is customary in auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2004).

All co-founders were given the chance to read and approve their parts when the article was written. There was no disagreement about the shared output once it was written – but what should be mentioned is that my co-founders kept questioning – during our phone call and in informal conversations afterwards – whether their entrepreneurial experience of failure was failure or not. I considered this as part of my data and will include this in my analysis. On the next two pages you will find the two stories that came out of the co-construction – the starting point for my *understanding-with* others.

Experience(s) of journalistic failure

This one time I wrote a piece about a local talk show. I knew I wasn't as well prepared as I could have been, and I felt unsure about the whole thing. I didn't even know what kind of article my editor wanted out of this. During the show I focused on finding my angle, and quickly summarized the numbers that were mentioned that evening. When I then asked one of the guests a question after the show, he called me out on misquoting him. I was embarrassed, but luckily, the guest himself made a joke out of it and the conversation carried on in a friendly tone. However, his PR-manager was standing right beside us, shaking her head, so I knew for sure I was going wrong in some way. This made for a mixture of relief and a nagging feeling of guilt.

The next morning, when the article I had written appeared in the newspaper, I received an e-mail. Some of the numbers I had quickly summarized turned out to be – well, not wrong, but not completely in the right context. The person who had delivered the numbers was mad and refused to participate in further interviews. I panicked. Apologized. It didn't work. A colleague had to arrange for a rectification in the newspaper. Also, some readers had started questioning the numbers on social media. Now they were doubting the accuracy of our news. The whole thing caused a feeling of failure: embarrassment, awkwardness, unprofessionalism. I carried the feeling around with me for a large part of the day.

Experience of entrepreneurial failure

[This moment was already described in the previous section – the failed event – which turned out to be the entrepreneurial failure all of my co-founders referred back to. Hence, this is our elaboration on that experience.] *All comments were positive. That was the one thing we could hold on to. Only seven people showed up. Seven. No changing that number by receiving positive feedback. Failing in this case had two consequences: (1) it demotivated us for future events – but (2) it also encouraged us to take revenge, to achieve success after all. We don't want to call it a complete failure, because what is failure? Do you fail after one time? Or achieve success if you learn from failure? The feelings towards this event are complicated. We cannot build a business out of seven recipients. But we learned from their feedback. And we learned how such an event would work technically. And we learned that the podcast as medium isn't as popular as we thought, and promotion is key. With such lessons learned, can something be called a failure? Conversations about this event altered between the positive feedback, assessing what we learned, and claiming how big of a disaster it was. We are doing it again next month.*

These co-constructions reveal two insights about the understanding of failure: (1) it confirms the importance of *becoming-with*, and (2) it shows that the meaning of failure is constantly negotiated and questioned in everyday practices.

- (1) All experiences of failure described in the assignments were connected to (imagined) others. They were about expectations not being met, and the feeling of failure when there was a sign this had happened (a shake of the head, getting mad, raising doubts on social media, or even a friendly joke). This reveals a shared (explicit or tacit) knowledge about what a journalist should be and do: only if there is knowledge about the roles and identity of a journalist can (s)he fail to live up to that knowledge. Furthermore, it reveals a normative element to failure in journalism: it is very much about what a journalist should be and do. This is perhaps so because journalism is sometimes conceptualised as being or providing a public service (Benson, 2017; Coleman, 2014; Galperin, 2017), serving the interest of a public. In the Netherlands, there is national news which is meant and paid for by all members of society, and as a result there are clear ideological ideas about what journalists should do. Failing the set of professional journalistic norms is not one of those things. Moreover, indeed, similar to how Van de Walle (2016) described for public services in general, my co-founders feel that as journalists, they cannot fail. One of them shared with me that he feels that there is no “safe space” to make mistakes. Others described journalistic failure as “inevitable” and “part of human nature”, in other words something which cannot be avoided – but given the chance one should. They thus seem to match the theoretical conceptualisation of failure as describe by Van de Walle (2016) for public service. This conceptualisation causes a stressful situation for them, in which they fear reprimands for mistakes. However, contrary to applying a clear-cut conceptualisation, the appearance (affect) of failure seems to emerge when in interaction with others. It is thus important – at least for failure in journalistic situations – to understand failure as a dynamic process of *becoming-with others*, rather than being derived from one ideal of what journalism should be.

- (2) What came to the fore in the experience of entrepreneurial failure is that the meaning of failure is constantly negotiated. It is questioned and is thus able to shift depending on the specific experience, sometimes contrasting a previous meaning. My co-founders openly questioned whether we had failed or not, doubting whether to accept one kind of failure (audience numbers) or another kind of success (positive feedback). Rather than experiencing the binaries of success and failure as good and bad, failure's meaning was adapted to a specific context. They, for example, experienced failure in entrepreneurship as a learning tool, describing it in the informal interviews as "the key to success" and "intertwined with entrepreneurship" – thus the tacit knowing that guides their emotions about failure in entrepreneurship is similar to how failure is conceptually described in the academic literature (Briggs, 2012; Ries, 2011; Shepherd et al., 2016). However, their questioning also came from that same knowledge: if failure becomes a learning tool, is it still failure? It was also not clear which kind of the experience – failure in audience numbers or success in feedback – we should take as the "result" of our event. The point here is that failure is fluid. Its meaning is redefined to turn negative affect into positive. Moreover, by doing that, failure escapes the binary opposition of good versus bad, enabling entrepreneurs to use the meaning of failure which is most productive in their situation. The very essence of experiencing something as negative (negative affect, realisation not meeting intention) but still being able to take something positive away from it – even though the affect largely remains negative – drove us to further experiment with similar events. Because we can use failure this way, a certain product is not immediately terminated, but tested further and investigated. In this respect, failure is not an outcome, but part of a continuous process. It is treated as a part of the puzzle, rather than the end. All because we do not have a shared understanding of failure, but a shared doubt of failure – this doubt allows us to treat failure as a learning tool for innovation (Briggs, 2012). For the understanding of failure, this indicates that we should not assume that there is one conceptualisation of one sort of failure at work in practices, or that a moment of failure retains its meaning throughout practices. Instead, it becomes more interesting to see how failure is constructed and used to construct, to properly assess its overarching function(s) in entrepreneurial journalism.

Conclusion

Data from this article have provided us with a glimpse of how failure would function in entrepreneurial journalism – but we need more data and further unpacking before we can create a solid argument about the functions of failure. This article first focused therefore, on the understanding of failure. Throughout the article, it became clear that failure in practices can be understood as (1) a plurality of moments, with (2) fluid meanings that are constantly negotiated and redefined, and (3) that are always constructed-with others. This understanding contrasts normative theories which present one clear conceptualisation and function of failure, such as a learning tool (Briggs, 2012) or something to be avoided (Van de Walle, 2016).

The article has also argued that we can use this understanding to focus on the particulars of tacit knowing that guide the appearance (affect) to assess *how* failure

functions in everyday practices. This kind of knowing both includes and bridges the gap between theoretical and empirical knowledge, focusing on how they are constructed together. Teasing out these particulars will draw us away from the what, and towards who does what *with who and what* (Haraway, 2016), which I would summarise as follows: *how*? However, that question is for another article.

Notes

1. These were recorded since the first of February 2016.
2. News editors in their study pictured imaginary audiences while they were writing, assessing what they would think of the content, and alter their texts accordingly.
3. Referring to knowing and understanding as not only in your mind, but resonating throughout your entire body. Among other things, it is the sort of knowledge that when somebody tries to explain it to you, they give up, stating: “you just have to do it, then you’ll get it”.
4. In the digital version of this article, these links will lead you to a musical illustration of affect. It exemplifies how failure felt throughout my body, at the time of reading about the conceptualisation of failure in entrepreneurship. This mood/affect is difficult to put in words, but music will hopefully make you experience what I experienced then. Additionally, these songs are another form of empirical data, because I listened to them in the period leading up and after this experience.

Acknowledgements

Although they are not mentioned as second authors, this article would not have existed without the constant feedback and support of my supervisors Dana Mustata and Tamara Witschge. Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to the EMMA community – who gave me the confidence to further pursue this topic – and to the NWO (The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) who provided funding for the overarching research project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO).

Notes on contributor

Amanda Daniëlle Brouwers is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at the University of Groningen. She is currently specialising on the topics of entrepreneurial journalism, tacit knowing, and podcasting.

References

- Ahva, L. (2017). Practice theory for journalism studies. *Journalism Studies*, 18(12), 1523–1541.
 Audi, R. (2015). *The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bennett, L. W., Lawrence, R. G., & Livingston, S. (2007). *When the press fails: Political power and the news media from Iraq to Katrina*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Benson, R. (2017). Can foundations solve the journalism crisis? *Journalism*, 1–19.
- Briggs, M. (2012). *Entrepreneurial journalism: How to build what is next for news*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Coleman, S. (2014). Journalism and the public-service model: In search of an ideal. In K. Kenski & K. Hall Jamieson (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Sola Pool, I., & Shulman, I. (1959). Newsmen's fantasies, audiences and newswriting. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 23(2), 145–158.
- Edmondson, A. C. (2011). Strategies for learning from failure. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(4), 48–55.
- Ellis, C. (1999). Heartful autoethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(5), 669–683.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Galperin, S. (2017, July 19). Journalism is a public service. Why don't we fund it like one? *Cambridge Journalism Review*. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/local-news-special-service-community-information-districts.php
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Harway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Hirschheim, R., & Klein, H. K. (2003). Crisis in the IS Field? A critical reflection on the state of the discipline. *Journal of the Association of Information Systems*, 4(1), 237–293.
- Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's hope. essays on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Le Feuvre, L. (Eds.). (2010). *Failure*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Özçelik-Buskermolen, D., & Terken, J. (2016). Co-constructing new concept stories with users. In P. Markopoulos, J. B. Martens, J. Malins, K. Coninx, & A. Liapis (Eds.), *Collaboration in creative design*. Cham: Springer International Publishing Switzerland.
- Polanyi, M. (1966). *The tacit dimension*. London: Routledge.
- Ries, E. (2011, April 1). *The lean start-up*. [Video file] Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEvKo90qBns&t=2711s>
- Schatzki, T. R. (2001). Introduction: Practice research. In T. R. Schatzki, K. Knorr Cetina, & E. von Savigny (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (pp. 10–23). London: Routledge.
- Schulz, K. (2010). *Being wrong. Adventures in the margin of error*. London: Portobello Books.
- Schumpeter, J. A. (1934). *Theory of economic development: An inquiry into profits, capital, credit, interest and the business cycle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Shepherd, D., Williams, T., Wolfe, M., & Patzelt, H. (2016). *Learning from entrepreneurial failure: Emotions, cognitions and actions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van de Walle, S. (2016). When public services fail: A research agenda on public service failure. *Journal of Service Management*, 27(5), 831–846.
- Vos, T. P., & Singer, J. B. (2016). Media discourse about entrepreneurial journalism. *Journalism Practice*, 10(2), 143–159.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2017). A manifesto for failure in journalism. In P. Boczkowski & C. Anderson (Eds.), *Remaking the news*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Witschge, T. (2015). *Entrepreneurship at work. Analysing practice, labour, and creativity in journalism*. Retrieved from http://www.rug.nl/staff/t.a.c.witschge/entrepreneurship_at_work_witschge.pdf